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Personal responsibility

In the last few years, the value of personal responsibility has had something of a renaissance in American culture and political discourse, and the results have rippled through our society in many ways. Renewed focus on this basic value has been a part of efforts to restore dignity and hope to people on welfare, to hold government officials accountable for achieving results, and for encouraging greater citizen responsibility for the state of our own families, communities, and schools.

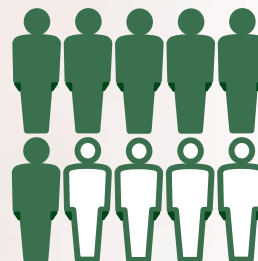
Restoring the Promise of Upward Mobility • In the 1990s, personal responsibility was a cornerstone of our nation's and state's welfare reform debate. A clear majority of Americans wanted a system to help families in need that encouraged independence and hard work - not perpetual dependence. This desire was based to some degree on myths about people on welfare, and resentment of the undeniable fact that welfare recipients had better health insurance (Medicaid) than many low-wage and even middle income workers.

Welfare - the federal Aid to Families with Dependent Children program - was originally designed to help widowed or abandoned mothers stay at home and raise their children. Its demise is the result of a profound social and economic change: the entry of a majority of mothers into the workforce, and the development of a new norm of two-earner families and working single parents. In this new culture of work, the stigma attached to not working - and not taking personal responsibility for supporting one's own family - became more pronounced.

**America is
experiencing a
renaissance
of personal
responsibility**

Six out of ten of the 1999 WorkFirst clients were employed in early 2001

Their median hourly wage was \$8.25



Source: Data from the longitudinal *WorkFirst Study: 3000 Washington Families* (being conducted by the University of Washington and Washington State's Employment Security Department). Available on the Internet at <http://www.wa.gov/WORKFIRST/about/StudyIndex2.htm>

Personal responsibility



Photo courtesy DSHS Aging and Adult Services

In WorkFirst, Washington state's adaptation to the 1996 federal welfare reform act, every client signs an Individual Responsibility Plan that outlines what she or he will do to achieve the goal of economic independence. The role of DSHS caseworkers is to marshal the supports necessary to help people achieve the goals they set out in their plans - and to hold them accountable for implementing them.

Citizens can decrease the reliance on government by taking more personal responsibility.

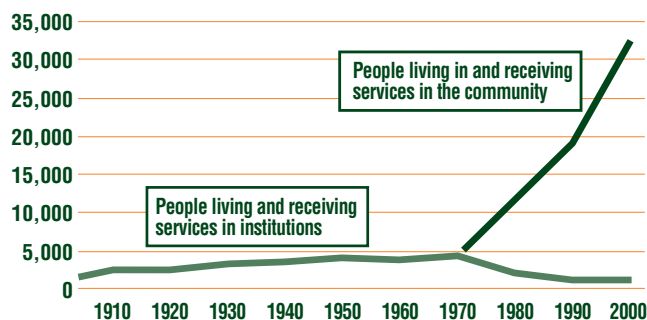
Taking Charge of One's Own Life • Taking personal responsibility for making one's own living is also an important goal for many people with disabilities, and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation helps them fulfill this ambition. The values of personal responsibility and economic productivity are also embedded in vocational programs for young offenders in the Juvenile Rehabilitation Administration, and in specialized employment programs for people with developmental disabilities.

People who have disabilities and elders who need long-term care services also want to assume more personal responsibility for planning and directing their own lives, and hiring their own personal assistants or caregivers. This powerful desire for autonomy is supported by recent court rulings that underline the right of people with mental illnesses and

developmental disabilities to leave institutions, and to get the support they need to live in their own homes or apartments. The long-term trend of reducing reliance on large institutions and creating new systems of self-directed care has, however, led to a conflict in assigning responsibility when things go awry: DSHS can be legally liable for the actions of caregivers paid with public dollars, even if they have been chosen, hired, and supervised by clients. Finding a new way to integrate freedom of choice while protecting clients and avoiding expensive lawsuits remains a challenge.

Now that services for people with developmental disabilities help support people living in their communities, fewer people are living in institutions

People served in institutional and community settings



Source: DSHS, Division of Developmental Disabilities 2000, and Economic Services Administration July 2001

Personal responsibility

Investing Time Wisely • One important part of the solution to this problem is for neighbors, friends, and even total strangers to assume more personal responsibility for the protection of vulnerable adults - and children - by reporting suspected abuse and neglect to the DSHS statewide hotline (1-866-ENDHARM).

Citizens can also help reduce the cost of government and improve the health of our communities by being more generous with time. Every hour spent helping kids grow up healthy, looking after vulnerable neighbors, or participating in community organizations is an hour invested in a better future. Failing to assume personal responsibility for our future reduces the quality of life for all of us, and increases the need for taxpayer-supported, government-provided human services.

**Taking responsibility
for our own lives takes
courage – especially
for victims of domestic
violence.**



Photo courtesy Veronika Hauser

Veronika Hauser came to Washington with little except her son to escape an abusive relationship in Arizona. Her father took her to a WorkFirst office in Bellevue where she began her successful odyssey to a job as a patient care technician at Overlake Hospital Medical Center. She went on to attend college so she can become a registered nurse.

Read the complete story posted on the Internet at: Facing the Future Profiles, located at <http://www.wa.gov/dshs/FacingtheFuture/NewsProfiles>